

Being a caregiver

How to take care of yourself while caring for another

If you are providing care for a loved one, you're not alone. According to Medicare, about 44 million Americans care for loved ones with a chronic illness, disability, or frailty.¹ AARP notes that 61% of caregivers were employed at some point in the past year²—compounding the challenge and stress of caregiving.

Caregiving is seldom easy. It involves providing financial, physical, emotional, and/or spiritual support to someone who is unable to live independently. According to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), slightly more than half of caregivers (51%) feel their role has given them a sense of purpose or meaning. At the same time, 36% rate the stress of their situation as either a four or five on a five-point scale.² But there are ways to manage stress and keep it from overwhelming you.

The time spent in caregiving can range from a relatively short rehabilitation period to many years of helping another person through their journey. As a caregiver, you may have competing demands on your time. At the same time, you may feel the emotional drain of caring for someone whose condition may not improve. If you are working outside the home, building a career, and raising a family simultaneously, you'll need to learn more than multi-tasking. You'll need to watch for signs of burnout and hone your stress-management skills.

Burnout—the signals

Caregiving leads to stress. And this stress can manifest itself in various ways. Ask and honestly answer these questions to help determine your stress level:

- Are you easily agitated with those you love?
- Do you frequently criticize others?
- Do you have difficulty laughing or having fun?
- Do you turn down invitations to be with others?
- Are you feeling depressed about your situation?
- Are you hurt that others are not recognizing and appreciating your efforts?
- Are you resentful when other family members fail to help?

1. Source: "There's Help for Caregivers, Too," medicare.gov, November 8, 2019.

2. Source: "2020 Report: Caregiving in the U.S." AARP, May 2020.

- Do you feel trapped by all the responsibilities?
- Are you having trouble sleeping?
- Do you get regular exercise?
- Do you feel guilty when taking time for yourself?

Signs of caregiver stress

- **Physical.** Exhaustion
- **Emotional.** Resentful, stressed, bitter, feeling used or unappreciated
- **Financial.** Overwhelmed or depleted

What you can do for yourself

Reduce stress in your life. Take time for yourself. And ask for help. All this is easier said than done, but here are a few tips that may help you take the steps you need to take to improve the quality of your life and the care you give.

Reduce stress

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, if you take practical steps to manage your stress, you may reduce the risk of negative health effects. Here are six tips that may help you cope with stress:

1. **Be observant.** Recognize the signs of your body's response to stress, such as having difficulty sleeping, experiencing increased alcohol and other substance use, being easily angered, feeling depressed, and having low energy.
2. **Talk to your health care provider or a health professional.** Don't wait for your health care provider to ask about your stress. Start the conversation and get proper health care for existing or new health problems. Effective treatments can help if your stress is affecting your relationships or ability to work.
3. **Get regular exercise.** Just 30 minutes per day of walking can help boost your mood and improve your health.
4. **Try a relaxing activity.** Explore relaxation or wellness programs, which may incorporate meditation, muscle relaxation, or breathing exercises. Schedule regular times for these and other healthy and relaxing activities.
5. **Set goals and priorities.** Decide what must get done now and what can wait. Learn to say "no" to new tasks if you start to feel like you're taking on too much. Try to be mindful of what you have accomplished at the end of the day, not what you have been unable to do.
6. **Stay connected.** You are not alone. Keep in touch with people who can provide emotional support and practical help. To reduce stress, ask for help from friends, family, and community or religious organizations.³

Take time for yourself

Build a team that can help you. Whether it's friends, associates, members of your faith community, or others, teamwork will reduce the likelihood of burnout and enhance the care you provide. Working as a team can result in well-deserved time for yourself to watch a movie, read a book, or enjoy a nap.

3. Source: "5 Things You Should Know About Stress," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, NIH publication #19-MH-8109.

Keep family members, even relatives who express little interest, informed on a regular basis about the care being provided. These meetings can take place in person, on the phone, or by email.

List things that need to be done and ask family members to take responsibility—at least on an occasional basis—for certain tasks, such as picking up a prescription or doing laundry. Just because friends or neighbors have not volunteered doesn't mean they don't want to help. Make a list of all the people you know who may be able to lend a hand. Ask them for help with specific tasks based on their strengths.

Resources available

To find your local Area Agency on Aging, along with other resources for seniors and caregivers, use the Eldercare Locator at eldercare.acl.gov, a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging. You may also want to review these organizations' services:

Family Caregiver Alliance

caregiver.org

National Alliance for Caregiving

caregiving.org

Caregiver Action Network

caregiveraction.org

Ask for help

Beyond your network team, take advantage of the resources available nationwide for caregivers.

One of the best places to turn is your local Area Agency on Aging. This organization can provide valuable information on:

- Case management
- In-home care
- Home-delivered assistance devices
- Personal emergency-response systems
- Access to adult day care
- Home-delivered meals
- Senior activity centers
- Caregiver training programs